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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an explanation for the rise of radical, social movement activity among youth in the United States in the 1960s and for the decline of such activity in the 1970s. Mannheim's theory on generations is used to explain this phenomenon. Mannheim argued that the major historical events of an era will profoundly shape the political and social consciousness and perspective of youth reaching maturity in a particular era. Key historical, cultural, and political events of the late 1950s and the early 1960s are shown to have predisposed an influential minority of young people toward social movement activity and later radicalization. The key to the emergence of the radical youth movements in the 1960s was the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and early 1960s, which shattered the political apathy of the 1950s. It was the most important factor in creating and increasing awareness by some young people of the inequalities in American society. Ultimately, this lead to the creation of a sense of injustice about other aspects of American society and a belief that these should be changed by individual and collective action. In contrast, youth who came of age in the later part of the 1960s and 1970s were not involved in social movement activity. It is argued that historical events during this time influenced the generation coming of age into a political orientation with an emphasis on individual fulfillment and not on participation in movements for social change. Proposals are put forth for methods and approaches to study and understand social movement activity among youth. (Author/JK)

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Generations and Social Movements of the 60's and 70's

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The disappearance from the American scene in the 70's of visible radical political activity on campuses and among youth in general which characterized the 60's has attracted a great deal of attention from a variety of social commentators and analysts. A number of explanations have been put forth to account for the collapse of 'the movement' in the 70's. Some of these explanations have been the end of active American involvement in the Vietnam War, the end of the draft, the poor job market for college graduates and the economic recession and a general sense of frustataion and disillusionment within "the movement" over the failure to bring about meaningful change in American Society.

While granting that all of these factors had something to do with the decline in visible, radical activity among youth this paper will argue that any explanation based on one or any combination of these factors is incomplete. This paper will put forth the hypothesis that Karl Mannhiem's concept of a generation as an important social grouping is extremely useful in understanding why these social movements did not continue into the 70's. (Mannhiem, 1952) Mannhiem argued that the major historical events of an era will profoundly shape the political and social consciousness and perspective of youth coming to maturity in a particular era. Futhermore, these impacts will persist throughout the lifetime of a generation.

This paper will show how historical events and the cultural milleu of the late 50's and early 60's predisposed a portion of the generation which came of age politically and socially in this era to involvement in political and social action. It will be argued that historical events in the later part of the 60's and early 70's would influence the generation coming of age in this era into a political orientation with an emphasis on individual fulfillment and not on participation in movements for social change.

In proposing a generational explanation to account for the rise of radical movements among American Youth in the 60's and the seeming collapse of these movements in the 70's the writer is not unaware of the methodological problems of the approach. It is often difficult to objectively justify the boundaries between generations. It must also be recognized that not all members of the age group experience and react to crucial historical events and trends in the same way. (For a discussion of these and other problems, see Spitzer, 1973) But despite these problems this writer believes that generational analysis does provide a new perspective on the dynamics of social movement activity among youth of the lack of it in both the 60's and 70's.

The Generation of the 60's

The student radicals of the 60's were an intensely researched and studied group. With the passage of a few years, it has become clear that most of these studies told us little about forces that led to the emergence of radical movements among youth at a particular point in time. Most studies of student radicals have done little more than to provide a demographic and psychological profile of student activists. A large number of studies emphasized the influence of a variety of social background variables such as social class, sex, grade point averages and academic majors on student activism (Braungart & Braungart, 1974). Other studies focused on the political atmosphere within families of student activists as they grew up as a major factor in promoting later radicalism. (Flacks, 1969) Recent studies however have cast serious doubt on the ability of background variables to explain

student activism (Aron, 1974). Only by looking at general cultural, political and social trends in American society as a whole can these studies fall into their proper context.

In retrospect the key to emergence of radical youth movements in the 60's was the example of the Civil Rights Movement of the 50's and early 60's. The Civil Rights did not just provide tactics, ideology and rhetoric for the student movement. It was the most important factor in creating and increasing awareness by some young people of the inequities in American society which had been ignored throughout most of the 50's. The experience of the Civil Rights Movement either directly or vicariously shattered the political apathy of the 50's. Ultimately, it would lead to the creation of a sense of injustice about other aspects of American society besides the plight of Blacks and a belief that these could and should be changed by individual and collective action. The Civil Rights Movement was also important in that it created among certain segments of youth a sense of movement, change, and hope. It seemed to give tangible evidence that American Society could change in a positive way. The style and spirit of the Kennedy administration futher reinforced these attitudes among youth.

Ralph Turner has argued that the key to the emergence of organized social movement activity is the replacement of sense of misfortune by a sense of injustice. For Turner, the emergence of a social movement requires more than objective deprivation or alienation. It is necessary for individuals to see their problem not as a result of fate or of forces which are too powerful to change or resist. Individuals must come to believe that a situation can and should be changed by collective action. By the mid 60's this transformation had occured among an important segment of American youth. (Turner, 1969) No longer could the status of Blacks, or the existence of poverty in a be passed off as unfortunate but inevitable. These perceived injustices that sparked social movement activity among white middle and upper class youth had not for the most part affected these youth directly.

Up until the middle of the 60's the political consciousness of most of this generation of youth with some degree of political and social awareness was not radical to an significant degree. Existing institutions were seen as adequate to bring about needed changes. Basic structural change in American Society was rarely considered and if it was, it was viewed as both unnecessary and undesirable. In this period it seemed to most politically active and aware youth that meaningful social change could come through "normal" political channels and "appealing to the conscience" of the nation. Political processes were viewed as open and flexible enough to solve any social problem through existing or somewhat modified structures.

By the mid-60's the liberal reformist idealogy of youth involved in social movement activity was rapidly being replaced by a more radical, revolutionary idealogy. To understand this shift to the left and radicalization it is necessary to consider the impact of two events on the international and domestic scene. These events were first, the escalation of the Indochina war and secondly, the transformation of the black movement from an integrationist to a separatist movement and the outbreak of ghetto revolts. The hopes of the early 60's seemed to be frustrated and mocked by the Vietnam War and ghetto riots. These events were increasingly percived as a blatant contradiction of the notion that America was a positive force for change in the world. The plight of the Black under-class and the oppression of other minorities were increasingly seen as evidence of basic structural flaws in the American political and social system.

The experience of activist youth in this period; that of having these hopes frustrated by the Vietnam War and the inability of the Civil Rights movement to continue earlier sucesses was a powerful radicalizing force. (For discussion of the radicalizing potential of this sort of experience see Davis, 1962). Marxism was increasingly adopted as an ideology which provided answers

and explantions to current issues and problems. The student movement was itself not just a force for reform in America, but was seen as the vanguard of a revolution.

But the student movement never was able to play out its self proclaimed role as the precipitant of the new American revolution. Internal splits and factionalism, which have weakened so many American radical movements of the past, reduced the strength and effectiveness of the student movement, particularly S.D.S. (Unger, 1974, Sale, 1973). External factors such as legal and political harrassment and the winding down of the Vietnam War and the end of the draft reduced the impact and influences of the student movement. Perhaps more fundamentally the student movement was never able, by and large to move off campus and create alliances with non-student groups and broaden its base of support among other segments of American society.

With the beginning of the 70's it became increasingly clear that the student movement would be unable to maintain the same level of activism as it had in the 60's. Veterans of the movement were moving out of university environments which had facilitated involvement in political activity. This is not to say that student radicals became conformist members of the establishments the instant they received their diplomas. There is good evidence that a radical orientation acquired in youth generally lasts into adulthood (Newcomb 1967). But personal, rather than broader social and political concerns were coming to play a more important role in the lives of student radicals of the 60's. Even more importantly the generation which has coming of age in the 70's was proving to be neither as radical nor as activist as the generation which had preceeded it.

It has not been the purpose of this paper to describe the course of social movement activity among youth in the 60's (For this see Lakin and Fars,

1976). This paper also has no intention of maintaining that the overwhelming majority of youth in the 60's were deeply committed and involved in social movement activity. More pragmatic goals such as getting degrees, find jobs, getting a husband or wife and avoiding the draft (for personal rather than political or ideological reasons) were more important for most students than changing society in the 60's. Rather we are maintaining that we can usefully understand and analyze the youth movements of the 60's by looking at key historical and cultural events which shaped the political and social consciousness of the minority of activist youth who would set the tone for a much larger generation of youth. We now turn to an examination of how a very different set of historical and cultural circumstances produced a "new" youth generation in the 70's with a different political and social outlook which would in turn produce a very different pattern of social movement activity by youth in the 70's.

The Generation of the 70's

In the middle 60's teachers at most American colleges and universities had developed an expectation that each succeeding freshman class would be more radical and poltically active than the last. But by the late 60's and early 70's it was clear that this expectation was not being filled. As with the previous conhort of youth, the Vietnam War was the key factor in shaping political consciousness and social outlook. But for the generation which came of age in the late 60's and early 70's the Vietnam War was not the great radicalizing force it had been for an earlier generation. Students entering college in the late 60's and early 70's could not remember a time when the Vietnam War had not been an important national issue. The war to this group was not something that had been experienced as a frustration of earlier hopes and aspirations. This is not to say that youth of this era enthusiastically supported the war. But for this group dislike of the war was almost a given, rather than a factor

which produced disillusion and radicalization.

Another important difference between the experience of the youth generation of the late 60's and early 70's and earlier groups was the changing impact of Black protest movement. This generation had no direct experience of contact with the earlier, integrationist Civil Rights movement. For this group, Black movements were encountered as militant and separatist organizations whose main message to whites seemed to be "keep out!" or "leave us alone." The generation of youth which began to come political and social maturity in the late 60's ahd never directly experienced a period like the early 60's when hopes for major social changes seemed to be realistic and justified by events. As the 60's drew to a close political activity was increasingly viewed by youth as futile and irrelevant.

The Vietnam War wore on in spite of increasing anti-war activity. Hopes for racial justice and greater economic equality seemed to be permanently stalled. Confronted with a situation in which radical political activity was increasingly perceived as futile the youth generation of the late 60's and early 70's turned to more individualistic forms of political and social activity. The increasing use and acceptance of drugs, increasing tolerance of pre-marital sexuality and other forms of sexual experimentation, changes in popular music, clothing and hair styles all were increasingly viewed as means to personal fulfillment rather than being connected with movements for basic societal change. In the early 60's there had been a fundamental link between experiments with drugs, sex, and new lifestyles, and commitment to and support for basic societal change. But by the end of the 60's these type of activities had increasingly lost their political content.

The student movement of the 60's had hoped to promote radical social and political change within American Society. It legacy to the 70's was something very different; increased acceptance of a variety of new cultural forms in the

areas of music, dress, sex and personal life styles and very little, if any basic change in the structure of American Society. It has been claimed that the end of American involvement in the Indochina War was a direct result of anti-war movement in which youth played an important role. However a number of studies have shown that most of the American public came to oppose the war for reasons that had little to do with the arguements put forth by the anti-war movement. Indeed a number of surveys showed that a large proportion of the American public expressed opposition to both the war and the activities of the anti-war movements (Schreiber, 1976, Schuman, 1972).

This new generation came of age in an era characterized by a loss of belief in the possibility of social change and an emphasis on individual fulfillment. New types of social movements began to emerge to meet this new political and social situation. Religious movements ranging from fundamentalist Christian groups to a variety of oriental religions and philosophies came into prominence. (Ex-drug users provided an important part of the membership of these types of groups. Mauss, 1973). Movements dealing with occult and various mystical meditational techniques attracted substantial attention. Various types of encounter groups and the wide variety of therapies associated with the human potential movement experienced great growth (Back, 1972).

Turner's article (Turner, 1969) on the themes of contemporary social movements was written at the height of visible student protest. But Turner with great insight was able to see that in advanced capitalist societies social movements would be less concerned with traditional goals such as increased political participation and greater economic equality. Increasingly social movements would seek to reduce individual alienation and provide a sense of meaning for individuals which was not provided by established social institutions. Events since then have shown that the student activism and other

forms of protest directed at large scale social change have been substantially replaced by movements which seek to provide individuals with meaning.

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

This paper has not sought to make normative judgements about youth in the 60's or the 70's or the social movements which characterized either era. Rather it has attempted to show how key historical events and social and cultural trends have been experienced by different generations of youth coming to maturity have influenced political and social movement activity in very different ways in different eras.

If a generational approach is helpful in understanding social movement activity of youth in the recent past does it provide any insight into future trends and types of social movements among youth? It is probably unrealistic to expect social science to predict changes in the nature and types of social movements the same way as astronomers predict future positions of planets. But the generational approach sketched in paper can alert students of youth and social movements to key questions such as; what are the crucial historical events, cultural trends and social forces in a given historical era and how are they defined and interpreted by a given genrational unit? How do groups within a generation react differently to such factors and why?

If this generational approach has validity it would require a shift in the methods used for studying youth movements of the recent past and present. Sample surveys which examine and compare the social characteristics of participants (and sometimes non-participants) of various youth movements will not pick up the sort of generational influences discussed in this paper. To get at the impact of key historical and cultrual events on later social movements activity or inactivity something along the lines of the "life history" method used extensively by the Chicago School in the 20's could be quite useful

coupled with more standard survey and questionnaire data. Research along these lines might involve intensive questioning of veterans of the student movements of the 60's on how key political and cultural events in their formative years (the Civil Rights movement, the Kennedy Administration, the escalation of the war in Indochina) shaped their consciousness and later actions. It would also be important to see if these events are now viewed differently with the benefit of hindsight. A similar questioning of non-activists could also be useful. These results could then be compared with similar intensive interviews and life histories from participants in contemporary religious and consciousness movements of the 70's.

The use of generational analysis here should be seen as an explanatory sketch not as an example of a full developed and empirically tested model. But generational analysis does, I think, has great potential for understanding social movements of youth in the recent past, and in the uncertain present and future.

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